

Healing through Nature. A Lesson from the traditional Ameru culture in Kenya.

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The contemporary known cry in most parts of Meru and the entire Kenya nation is how rivers and springs are drying. Everyone, including school-going kids, understands the main factor contributing to this. The limited rains and reduced water relate to the loss of biodiversity, forest cover, and loss of the catchment areas. I have realized that most Meru people know of the causes of ecological degradation, but the challenge is the preservation and meeting their 'need' or 'greed.' There is also a lifestyle change, away from the traditional indigenous knowledge. This has contributed to a lack of viewing the forests as a sacred place of contemplation and healing. Additionally, forests are considered and understood in commercial terms, leading to further exploitation and escalating the suffering.

I write this paper as a reflective narrative. How nature sacred meaning in the traditional Ameru culture brought healing in the society. The Ameru life lesson, how they interacted with nature, how they treated their living using nature, and how nature served as the resting place for their dead, is an integral part of how nature brought healing. It offered physical, psychological and spiritual healing. Their approaches might help us to see how nature is part of our healing; a recognition of our interconnectedness. There is no scientific claim to support that their action brought healing, however, nature and spirituality generated hope and connected the dead with the living. Forested areas were part of their integral spirituality, an 'heaven' for their ancestors, who were watching over them.

Defining the Ameru and their spirituality before Christianity

Ameru is a Bantu group of people currently living on Mount Kenya's and Nyambene slopes in the present Meru County, Tharaka Nithi County and minorities in the surrounding counties (Isiolo, Embu, Laikipia Counties). The group comprises the subtribes, Igembe, Tigania, Imenti, Mwimbi, Miutini, Igoji, Muthambi, Chuka and Tharaka. Despite the sub-tribes,

Academia Letters, June 2021

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Citation: Mukaria, A. (2021). Healing through Nature. A Lesson from the traditional Ameru culture in Kenya. *Academia Letters*, Article 1350. <https://doi.org/10.20935/AL1350>.

Meru exists as one tribe and a group of people sharing common cultural values, traditional religion, language (though with differing dialects) and practices. Presently, most of the Ameru are Christians, the majority being the Methodist, and other major denominations are Presbyterian, Catholic, and Pentecostal, with traces adhering to Islam and traditional beliefs and practices.

Ameru's history of migration, spirituality and religious belief are all tied together. This story has been passed orally and through artefacts for generations since there are no clear written texts. Ameru's religious beliefs and spirituality are very much a product of their migration and history, more so for the older generation. It has fascinating similarities with Jewish mythology, even though it was narrated much earlier than their encounter with Christianity or any religion with a Jewish background. This might give the narrative some authenticity, or doubt, or question whether the Ameru had any contact with Judeo-Christian religion before their encounter with the European-Christianity. Furthermore, it might be held that the Ameru might be some of the remnants of the lost tribes of Israel, or additionally use this to discredit the present colonial history narrative that their migration was solely from the Congo-forest, part of the Bantu migration.

According to scholars like Bernardi, Fadiman, etc., the Meru people "began" in *Mbwaa*, a place that remains unknown. Most anthropologists suggest it to be in the Kenyan coast-Island of Manda, while others, like M'Imanyara, believe the Ameru migrated from the North (Sudan-Ethiopia-Egypt). The two hypotheses define the perceived places of the Ameru origin. From narratives, God created and kept them. Ameru's account of creation and fall follows an equal description to the Biblical account. It is held that God created a boy first, and out of the boy's loneliness, he created a partner, and that is how they grew into a larger community. (Bernardi 1989). During this time, they did not cultivate because there was neither eating nor wearing of clothes. After the creation story, a temptation story follows, explaining why human beings have to die and suffer.

The critical part of Ameru history is held in the narratives of their captivity and migration from *Mbwaa*. The spirituality of Ameru is cemented in this narrative. *Muwe*, and *Muaa* (these are all traditional office bearers and healers, with *Muwe* as prophets and *Muaa* as medicine people or traditional healers). These two find their position in the Ameru spirituality based on the story of the exodus from their captivity. This is because of their role in leading the people of Meru out of captivity from *Mbwaa* and healing them. It is held that the Ameru, also referred to as *Nгаа[1]*, were under captivity by *ngua or nguun tune* (red-clothed) in the Island of the sea called *iria intune* (red sea)[2].

Before the Ameru left *Mbwaa*, their persecutors put them through several tests. First, they were asked to produce a sandal of leather from the skin with hair on both sides. *Mwithe* or

Muthurui, also commonly known as Koomenjue, is perceived as the first *Muwe* of the Ameru. He was a wise man who helped them to make a sandal from dewlap. After passing this first test, the persecutors put forth a second test to the Ameru to produce a bull that would give white dung. Again, Koomenjue suggested that the calf should be fed with *iraa* (diatomite) and milk. After feeding it for some time, the calf produced white dung, and the Ameru also passed their second test. Then there was the third test, to make a spear that could reach the sky. This third test challenged even Koomenjue, leading the Ameru people to plan their escape.

In their attempt to escape, they had to cross the sea (*iria itune*). How this escape occurs varies across the Ameru sub-divisions (Bernardi 1989: 59). The service had to call the healing expertise of Koomenjue. He asked for a volunteer, and Gaita (the self-destroying) was the first, and Akiuna (the bellies) had to follow in case the first sacrifice failed, while Muthetu (the soil) would be used as an altar for the sacrifice. Gaita was killed, with Muthetu as the base for the sacrifice or the altar. Akiuna was to stand and watch with his belly shaking as he would take his turn in case the sacrifice was not accepted. Gaita's entrails revealed how the Ameru people could escape out of captivity. He was sewn back together, rose again, and with his staff, he struck the water and divided the sea into two. The people crossed the sea. Koomenjue plays the secondary role of *Muwe* (spiritual leader) and *Muaa* (traditional healer). Clans were later named after them.

The forests became an integral part of the Ameru during migration. I mentioned above, *Ngaawa* was the original name of the Ameru. The name *Ngaa* is from *Ngaaruni*, meaning 'wilderness.' Additionally, the name *Meru* or *Miiru*, originating from the Maasai, means the 'forested area'. Thus, Ameru can technically be called the 'people of wilderness or forest.' The name is an indicator of the Ameru people's appreciation and significant association with natural habitats. These are non-imposed, existing indicators of natural realities. If we questioned, what is a name? Then we will realize a holistic co-existence in the meaning of the name *Meru*, and its spiritual connection to nature, and its power of healing. The connection with the natural world denoted their experiences- migration and settlement, which defines every facet of their existence. For Ameru, these were not empty markers. They indicated three perspectives; a name that is inherently given, a socially constructed meaning, and a concept built through interactions. Nevertheless, the identity of the Ameru people is not only in the forest but the values embedded in their culture. Though the forest was about living, in tune with nature, one another, and connection with ancestors. Nature is the conglomerate of all things; the people, forests, mountains, sun, rains, moon, and spiritual beings. In this case, the forest served as an identity with sacred meaning as an expression of the extra human actor. It gives the living meaning and gave life to those perceived dead. Therefore, it defined life and positioned spirituality.

With the coming of the European missionaries, the first Ameru belief that was eradicated was the belief in nature spirits and how they held the sacredness of nature. Horne, the first colonial administrator in Meru built his administration offices and a 'standard' living place in a sacred place contrary to the Ameru customs. His activities, such as clearing sacred forests and diverting rivers into trenches (with nature believed to be sacred) (Nthamburi, 1982), became the genesis of the exploitation of nature. Today, only a few places such as hills, mountains, grooves, and forested areas are offered sacred meaning in worship and as shrines of the council of elders *Njuri Ncheke* (Rimita, 1988).

Sacredness of Nature

For Ameru, a belief in the sacredness of nature was rooted in the sacred and divine presence in the natural world. Nature was considered a sacred place for prayers, reflections, contemplations, health and wholeness. Ameru spirituality was intrinsically eco-friendly. As it was seen, the Ameru people had a close relationship with nature, built during their flight from *Mbwaa*, where natural spaces (forest animals and rocks) became places they found companionship, security and sustenance. This cemented their relationships, a circle of life between the living, non-living and the dead (ancestors), and nature (plants, animals and non-animates). Nature provided herbs and medicine for their healing. Further, nature became a designated sacred space, considered 'ancestral and God's resting place' (*kiurunko kia Murungu*). Through a form of social construction, the forests gained divinity. This is because, throughout the exodus, Ameru laid their departed ones to rest. It is technically to say, the 'Ameru heaven.'

In accordance with Ameru spirituality, ancestral resting places are sacred. Hence nature found its meaning. Some nature spaces became imbued with unquestionable authority or prestige and are preserved for special or sacred use. They are holy, as places where the divine or supernatural power breaks through to the human world. Today, there still remain some places that were considered sacred spaces by the Ameru people, such as, *Kirimara* (Mount Kenya) *Njambene* (Nyambene rades and forest), *Ng'aya* forest, *Ioombe* 'lake', *Nkunga lake*, etc. Some sacred trees, plants, and animals also have unique preferences concerning divinity, divination, peace-making, and healing.

Healing grief through nature, Ameru perspective

In this section, based on narratives, I present how Ameru overcame grief through nature. The narrative show how nature impacts their well-being. For Ameru, it was not only about being in nature but being part of nature. As I said, the forest was an integral part of the Ameru spirituality.

In most African societies, the conception of death is intricately tied to life. In African communities (pre-Christian), death is just a rite of passage, to another existence, the old world. It is a transition that does not alter or end the life or change the person's temperament, but only

causes a change in its form (Bondi, 2015). It is held that individuals who have died continued to “live” in their ancestors’ land, and they continued to commune with their families. The goal of death in most African communities, including Ameru, was one to become an ancestor. Those who died had an “accurate” burial, bounded by significant religious formalities and cultural understanding of the people—a clear transition to becoming an ancestor (Mbiti, 1969). African life had two forms, Sasa (present) and Zamani (past) (Mbiti, 1969). In most African communities, Africans’ experiences progressed from present to the past and past to the present in a rebirth’s circulation motion.

The Ameru attitudes of death differed depending on the person’s lifestyle, social status and the cause of the end, not every death was ‘equal.’ Some death were more revered, which determined the grieving and ceremonies. Death of a good or ‘accomplished’ person and at an old age (*akiri*), per the customs, was perceived to be ‘sleeping’ and ‘dwelling’ well with the ancestors. This was contrasted with the death of wicked, evil individuals, those who died prematurely or in mysterious circumstances. To the evil or corrupt person, the Ameru said, ‘the person will keep on wandering’ (*Naaria eetire, ka ereeraga na miti yawe iri ituro*), without entering a world of ancestors, but as a tormenting spirit. Those who died in mysterious death or prematurely had to be ‘cleansed’ so that they may rest well and not come back to haunt the living ones (Mbiti, 1969).

For an ‘accomplished’ individual, despite mourning and a sense of loss, the event was not seen as a breach of day to day life. Though there was an inconspicuous and sad period of mourning and rituals, the death of a ‘virtuous person’ marked the prosperous end of one life cycle and was within the typical sequence of events. The death of a wicked or ‘unfinished’ person was a disastrous and dangerous event. ‘Unfinished’ refers to those individuals who had died prematurely, having not yet attained the status of elderhood, and those seniors who died too early to observe the ceremonial transfer of power to the next generation; thus, these situations required certain rituals. (Mukaria and Mukaria, 2019).

The importance of the rituals and why they mattered most was that an individual is not severed permanently from the living. The Ameru never conducted burial the modern way. The body of a person could never be buried in the ground or cremated. I stated earlier; the Ameru mythology was what defined every aspect of their culture. During their migration, they cemented a good ‘relationship’ with nature (Ibui, 2014). Forest became the dwelling place of the living and the dead. In case of near-death, individuals were taken into the forest and put in the ‘hut of death.’ It was a house built in the woods only for those nearing death. Once they die, the wild animals will consume them or rot in the forest. It may sound archaic, but the forest connected the living human and the dead. Therefore, the forest received a mark of the ancestors’ dwelling place and the living space for those alive. It also offered the meaning of

sacred space of contemplation and regeneration. The traditional healers, other sacred office bearers, and those in need visited the forest and other sacred spaces to communicate with the living dead. The experiences and the connection brought psycho-spiritual therapy and healing.

Further, Wangari Maathai said, when we heal nature we heal ourselves (Maathai, 2010). Her argument is that there are other invaluable health benefits when we take care of the natural environment. In this case, I do not wish to differentiate activities that might be called 'spiritual' and what might be called 'secular'. Prior to the westernization of most African communities, Mbiti opines, 'there was no dichotomy between what might be termed sacred or secular' (Mbiti, 1969). Life was holistic. There was a clear connection between what is physical and what is divine (sacred). It is visible, the destruction of the forest is now extended to us. We are wounded much as we have wounded the environment. The water has reduced and the little left is polluted, the air is full of fumes, the food has become less and contaminated, and there are plastics everywhere. This does not only hurt the environment, but it hurts us and has affected our health and our lifespan. To human beings, it has created physical, psychological and spiritual sickness. By healing nature, therefore, we will heal ourselves. That is how Ameru found healing in nature-the interconnected and wellbeing.

Conclusion

The approaches taken did not only help the Ameru overcome their grief, but in general, they met their needs. On matters of death, it was viewed as a moment of self-detachment with reality but still exist within nature. Death was merely a transition and not departure and following the will of God. Forest offered life meaning, a home, a providence, security, a point of connection with ancestors, and a sacred space of contemplation. This generated the intrinsic worth of nature, a sacred meaning, and value apart from a human being. It was all possible through the magical healing power of the forest.

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[1] Ngaa was the original name of the Ameru. The name Meru or Miiro came from the Maasai, meaning the 'forested' area. This indicates the Ameru people's great association with the forest. [2] Or the Reed sea.